

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION
of
FORD'S THEATER
in
WASHINGTON

by
Bun Po Kang

FOR INITIATION INTO
THE BETA CHAPTER OF MARYLAND
OF THE
TAU BETA PI HONORARY ENGINEERING SOCIETY

April 27, 1933

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF FORD'S THEATER

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION:

Things which have historical interest do not necessarily have to be large in size, but they must have had some unusual events happen in them. Ford's theater, although it is not a huge structure in comparison with some of our modern theaters, is an interesting and historical place in town because Abraham Lincoln was assassinated there.

HISTORY:

This building was erected one hundred years ago for the 10th Street Baptist Church by Thomas Berry, the builder of the United States Patent Office. It was converted into a play house in 1859. Three years later Mr. James Ford with other assistants bought the building and improved it to a full standard theater of its time. In the same year the theater was destroyed by fire. The repairs were soon completed. On April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was shot and killed by an actor J. W. Booth, while the President and his party were attending a play. Since the assassination the building has never been reopened as a theater. It was closed for eight years and then used for governmental offices. Twenty-two employees were killed during the falling of the front part of the building in 1893. Shortly after the repairs were completed the building was taken in control by the Director of Public Buildings and Parks of the National Capital, and used as a museum to commemorate

the assassinated President. Since that time the building has been opened for public inspection every day in the week.

CONSTRUCTION:

The walls of the building were built with red bricks in a style called the brick arch construction. Three floors and a basement are in the building, making an overall dimension of seventy feet deep, one hundred and four feet wide, and fifty-two feet high from street level. The floors are supported by fifteen ten-inch columns and seven seven-inch columns. The decoration was very elaborate. The roof of the building is not supported by columns but by wooden trusses of seventy feet spans. Slate roofing was hung on wooden sheathings. A rectangular opening was provided on the third floor to admit light and air to the second floor.

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF FORD'S THEATER

INTRODUCTION

A Chinese proverb says that a holy mountain is not necessarily high, but it depends on the presence of fairies; and a holy river is not necessarily deep, but it depends on the presence of dragons. This means that a great thing is not necessarily big, but it must have something unusual about it. Bethlehem is one of the thousands of small villages in the western part of Asia, but to tourists it is a sacred city, because Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human family was born there. Ford's theater is one of millions of theaters in the world, but the people look at it as a shrine, because it was there that Abraham Lincoln, a lover of humanity was killed. Before the assassination Ford's theater was an ordinary play house with no historical value. After the assassination the old-fashioned opera house became a holy place made sacred by the precious blood of the world hero whom not only the Negroes but all other slaves, no matter what color and what race they are, esteem as the father of real freedom and humanity.

For this historical value, Ford's theater is a place to be well known and remembered so that the spot where the great man of this country and of the world was forced to take his everlasting rest may not be forgotten.

HISTORY

It is very interesting to note that Ford's theater is exactly one century old this year. Its foundation was laid

by Thomas Berry, a well known builder of his date who built the United States Patent Office, in 1833. The building was originally constructed as a place of worship for the First Baptist Church, known as the 10th Street Baptist Church. Reverend O. B. Brown was the pastor. The building was used for this purpose until the ownership was changed.

In 1859 the building was converted to a play house. It had been serving this purpose until the assassination occurred. The first performance in its history was "THE NAIAD QUEEN". During the civil war this opera house was a carriage repository. The upper floor, however, was changed into a variety hall and called the Oxford.

A few years after the building began its theatrical career, it was improved into a full-fledged theater. Accommodations for attendance were largely increased as well as the capacity. At the end of the civil war it was altered more decidedly and assumed a more attractive name of Wall's Opera House to honor Mr. Berry's son-in-law.

Mr. James Ford, of whom the building was then named, with the aid of many other liberal citizens bought the building in 1862, transforming it into a still more attractive opera house and opened it for business in March of the same year as a most elegant bijou theater. The plan of transforming and redecorating was prepared and submitted by Mr. A. B. Mullett, who enlarged the stage and increased the seating capacity of the building to about two thousand and one hundred in three floors which occupy an area of about five thousand square feet.

There are several great and thrilling events which have occurred in this building which are of especial importance. On December 30, 1862, shortly after Mr. Ford purchased the building, a great fire caused by the explosion of escaped gas imperilled the building. Besides the structure itself, the actors' and actresses' expensive costumes, such as jewels and garments, were destroyed. The damage was estimated to cost more than twenty-five thousand dollars.

On the evening of April 14, 1865, the most catastrophic event occurred. While President Abraham Lincoln, accompanied by his party, attended the play, sitting in his private box, an actor, John Wilkes Booth broke into the private box and shot the President. He was fatally wounded and died the next morning. At this time the theater was only three years old after its reconstruction.

After the assassination the building was never again used as a theater. The government took possession of this property by paying the amount of two hundred twelve thousand and two hundred and fifty dollars (\$212,250.00). The building was closed for eight years, and then it was used for the Adjutant General's Office.

On the morning of June 9, 1893, while the government employees were working in the building at their regular duties, a great portion of the roof collapsed, killing twenty-two persons and wounding a still larger number. It was understood that the Government had been warned about the dangerous condition of the building, but the repair was not done early enough to

prevent such a horrifying accident. The cost of repairing after the fall amounted to six thousand dollars. The work was completed on December 31, 1893 under the direction of the chief engineer of the United States Army.

A bill was passed by the House of Representatives in 1930, that the building should be taken from the Secretary of War to the Director of Public Buildings and Parks of the National Capital to be used as a museum and library for exhibiting President Lincoln's possessions and the history of his life, so that the great man might be always remembered by the people. The appropriation fund voted by the Congress of May 11, 1926 for making this building a modern memorial was fifty thousand dollars. Up to this time the total cost of reconstruction of the building was estimated by the Director of Public Buildings and Grounds for the District of Columbia to be one hundred thousand dollars.

Recently the building has been very much improved. During the summer of 1931, several remodelling operations were done. This includes the replacing of skylight, snow board, and necessary roof. The west front was sand blasted and the bricks were restored to original color. The building is now under the direction of the Director of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital as voted by the Congress of 1930.

CONSTRUCTION

Although the building has been reconstructed several times, it is still remains in its ancient style. Three floors and a basement have a total area of approximately six thousand and

two hundred square feet. The depth of the building from north to south is about one hundred and four feet with a total height of fifty-two feet. This is given as its overall dimensions. It is the largest theater in this city of its date.

Approaching from the front of the building on 10th Street, one can recognize this historical building by its ancient appearance. It is adjacent to the central office building of the Potomac Power Company. On the ground floor there used to be five doors during Lincoln's day when it was used as a theater. The door at the extreme right end was the general entrance to the galleries. The next door was used generally by the officers of the theater, and through this President Lincoln was admitted for his last recreation. It led to the presidential private box. The box office was located between these two doors. The next two doors were seldom used as entrances except during mild weather, but they and the last door to the left were used as exits. When the tragedy occurred these two doors were closed, as during the month of April the weather is rather cold.

Since the building was converted into a museum, four of the five doors have been closed up and reconstructed to form windows, and the center one alone remains. On each of the other two floors there are as many windows facing the street as there are windows and door on the first floor.

As it is adjacent to the other buildings, the structure has no windows on the sides. The portion of side wall uncovered by other buildings were painted gray.

For the first floor according to the ancient plan of this

building, a large stage was located at the center with a dressing room adjacent at one side. Private boxes were constructed at both edges of the room. The box used by President Lincoln's party was on the south. The height of the ceiling is thirteen feet. It was supported by fifteen columns with a base diameter of ten inches and seven of seven inches. A thin partition was built running north and south across the center to separate the room into two compartments. Stairways leading from one floor to the other are at the south side. Each stairway is about five feet wide and the rises are about six inches. Small rooms are placed behind the stairways for the workers to keep their belongings. The ceiling was built of small arches about five feet spans which rest on the beams at their ends.

It was said that although the theater was very up-to-date at President Lincoln's time, the chief ushers had quite a difficult time to find some good furniture to accommodate the Presidential party, as the notice of his attendance was given to the management of the theater rather late. The ushers succeeded in securing a special soft rocking chair for the President, while the other members of the party accommodated with ordinary chairs.

The door from the presidential box to the gallery was supposed to be closed and locked while the President was inside, but J. W. Booth often played at Ford's theater and knew where the box key was hung. He was known to the attendants and his presence aroused no suspicion. He got hold of the key to come in and he put a chair against the back of the door, so that no body could come in to arrest him.

There was a lavish outlay upon the ornamentation of the theater. The front of the boxes, their Casa Guido windows and the archways of the auditorium were draped with silk hangings of fine texture and unique design. The drop curtain and facings of the stage were vraiseemblance of blue silk and white lace, exquisitely painted. The walls were tinted and the windows were to be adorned with stained glass which added very much of the rich effect of color. These decorations made the theater the best one in Washington at that time.

The walls of the structure were built of red brick, which were believed to have been made in the vicinity of Washington, probably in Maryland. The columns supporting the building are steel. The thickness of wall is eighteen inches. All bricks are laid in stretcher bound form.

The doors and windows were constructed of wood, while the outside frames are in brick arch forms. The transoms of the doors are semi-circular in shape. The height of the doors are ten feet and a half and the windows are eight feet. The width of both are about five feet. The exact dimensions are given in the sketches, and the floor plans have all the necessary dimensions.

All steps leading from the street to the building are made of granite. Although they do not appear as beautiful as marble or limestone, they are built of the hardest and most durable rock known.

Both the second and third floors, which were used for the offices of the Adjutant General of the United States Army after

the government possession, are all open floors without any partitions in them. The second floor is sixteen feet and six inches high, while the third floor is thirteen feet and six inches. No column is used on the third floor to support the roof, but an opening is found at the center of this floor to admit light and air to the second floor. The hole is rectangular in shape. The length is nineteen feet and two and three-sixteenth inches and the width is twelve feet and four inches. The winding stairs to the attic consist of twenty steps. The diameter is five feet and six inches.

The roof construction is one of the most outstanding features. The wooden truss spanning the seventy feet between bearing walls are perhaps the longest wooden spans ever built here. The roofing is slate laid on wooden sheathing.

The basement of the building is entirely different from the other floors in plan. It has partitions to divide it into small compartments. A heating plant was located at the southeast corner with two boilers. The heat was conducted to other parts of the building by ducts along the wall and the floors of the hall. The columns on this basement are square in shape.

It has been believed that all the steel and iron work in the structure might be made by the process of charcoal casting, as the Winder Building in Washington which was built at about the same time was found to have used charcoal casting iron.

CONCLUSION

For its historical background and its simplicity of construction this building is a place of real interest to be studied.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The information are collected from the following sources:

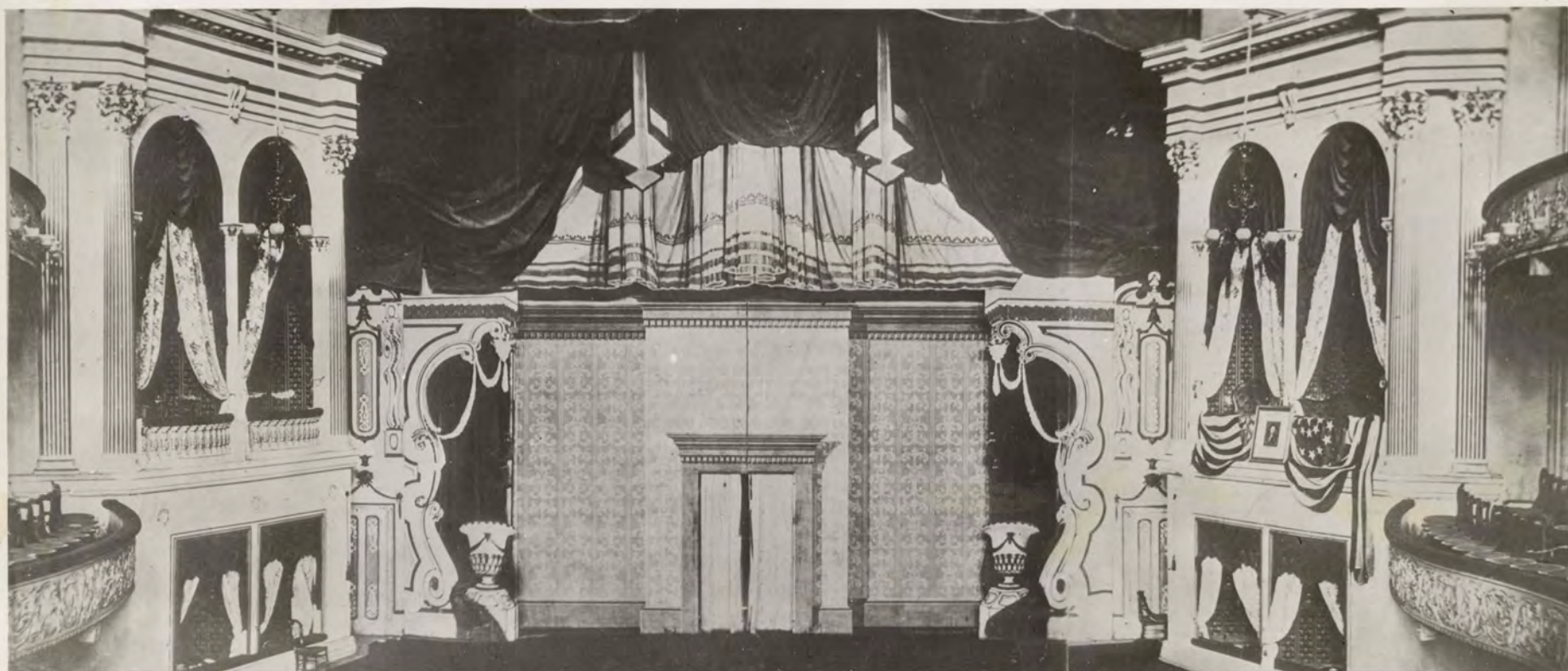
1. The Director of Public Buildings and Public Parks
of the National Capital.
2. The Washington Post.
3. The Evening Star.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

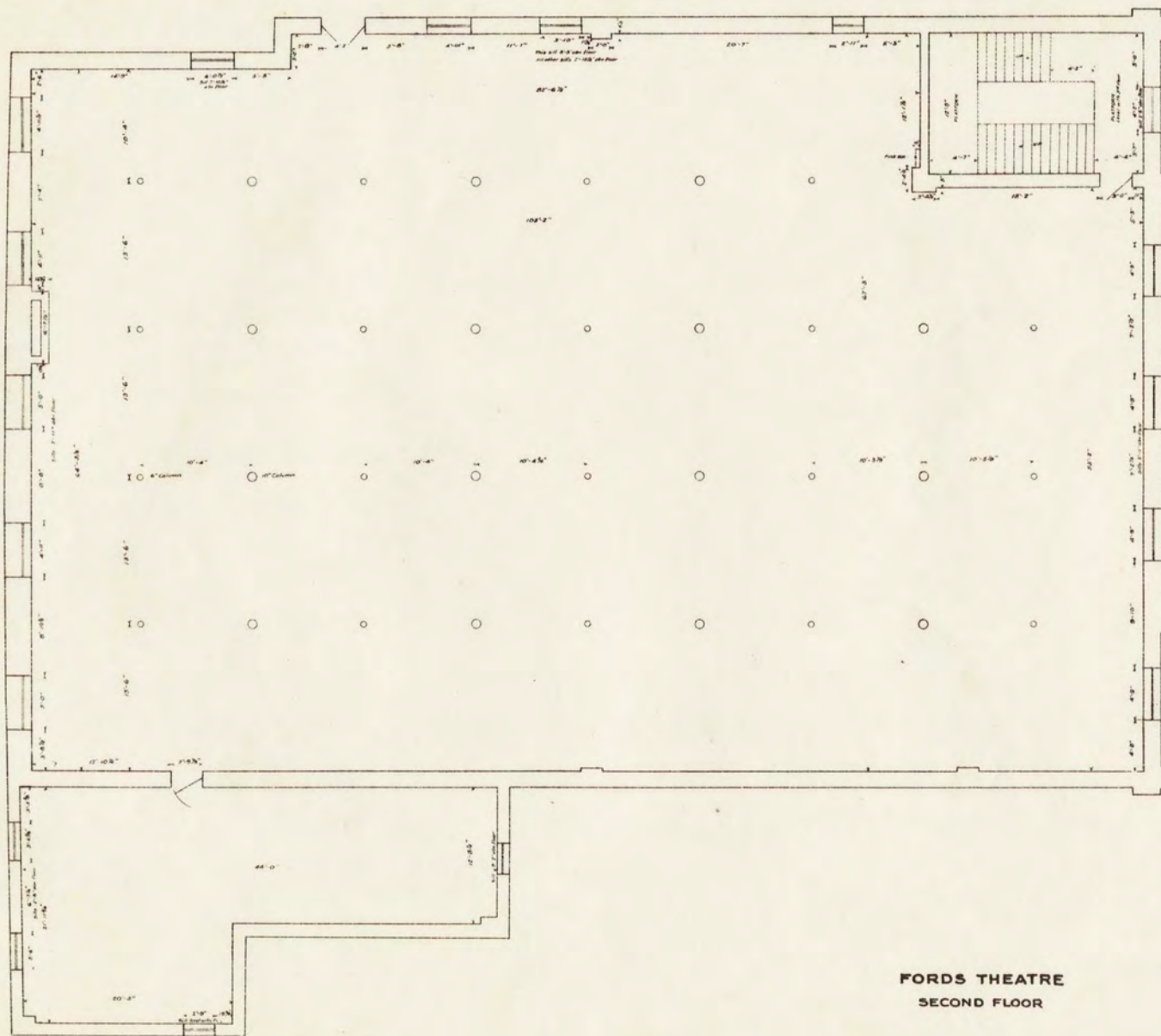
The writer of this article is indebted to the valuable information of the Director of Public Buildings and Parks of the National Capital; and the helpful advice of Dean A. N. Johnson, Professor S. S. Steinberg, and Professor R. H. Skelton.

Exterior Views of Ford's Theater at Present Time

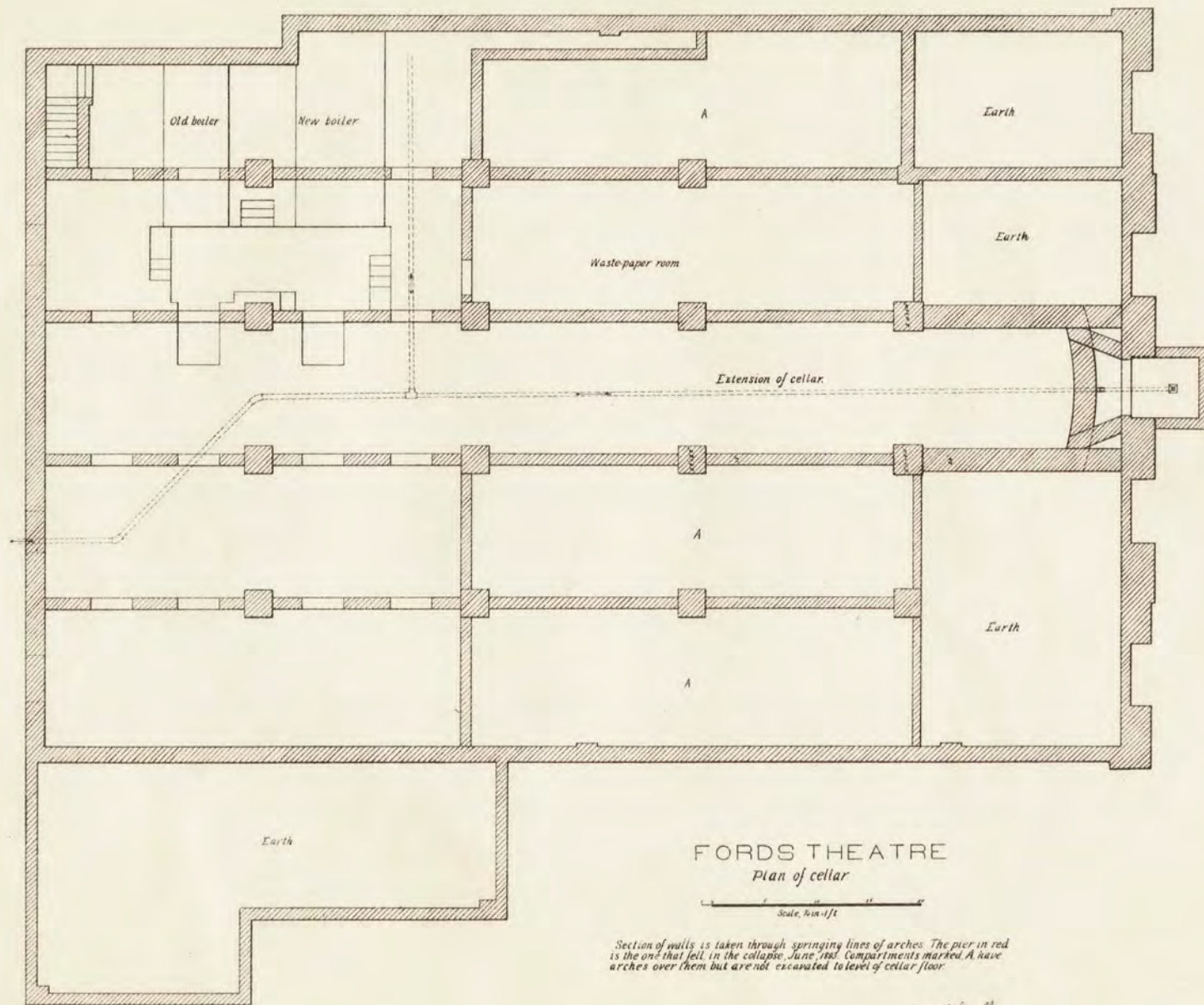






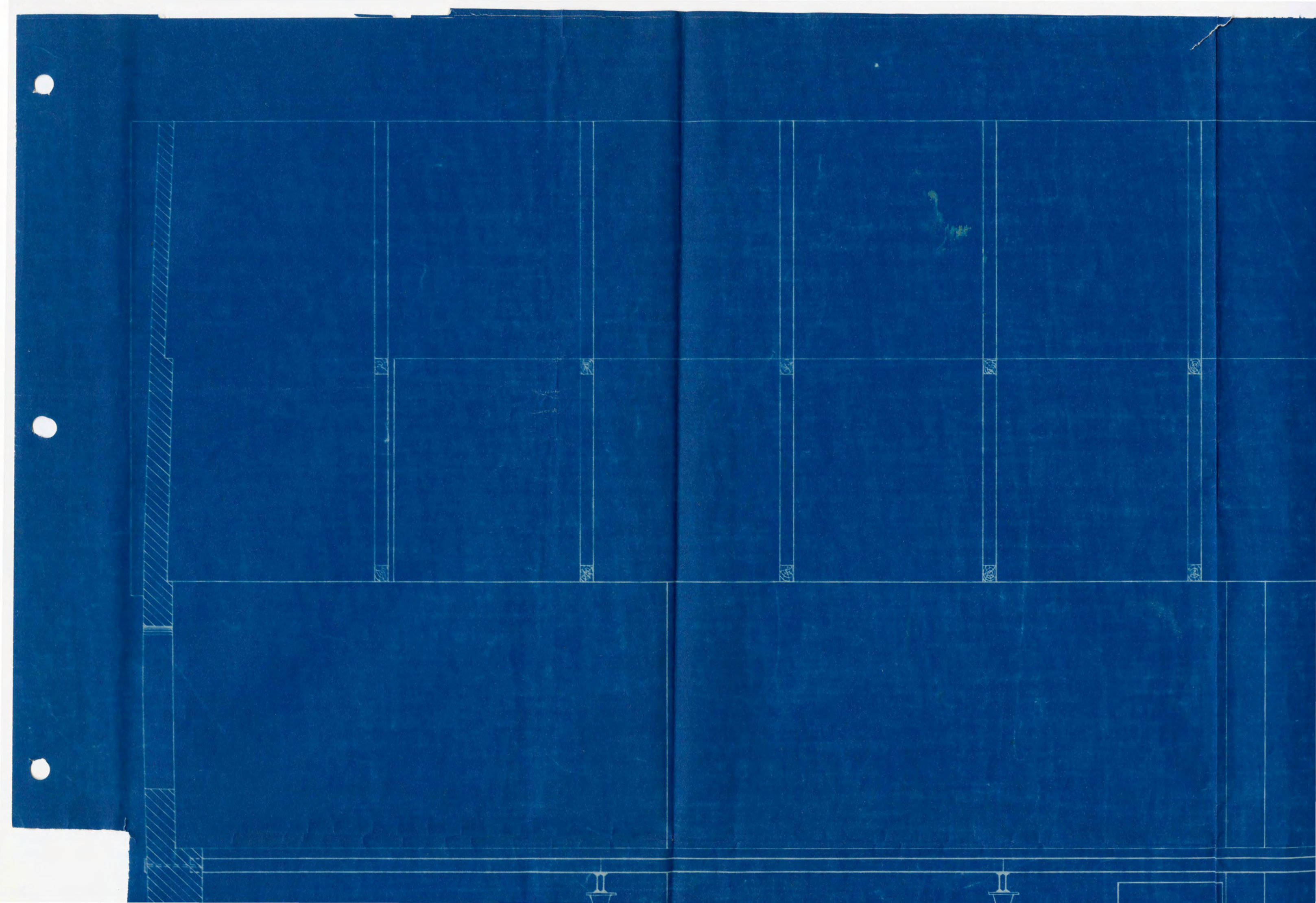


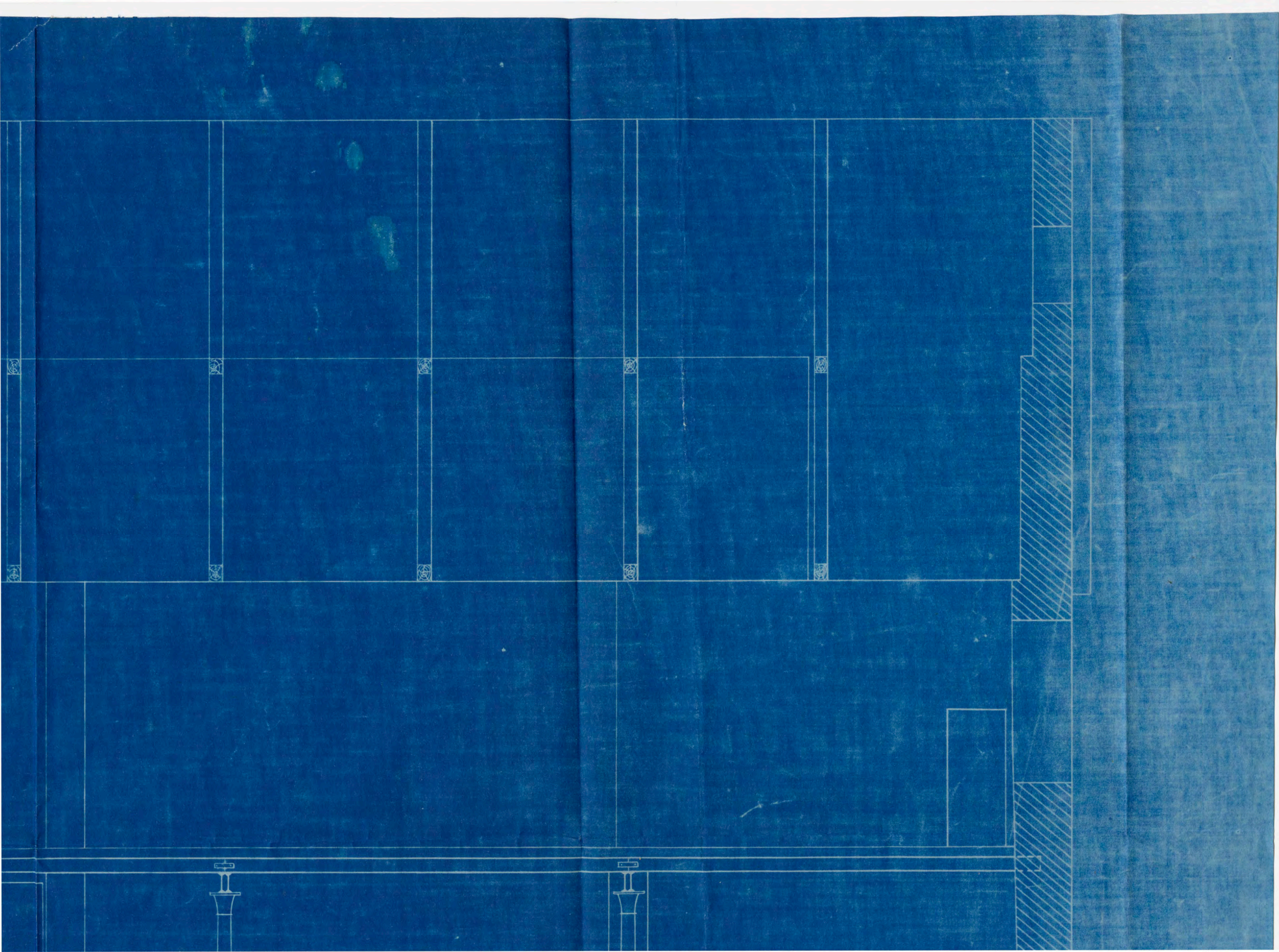
FORDS THEATRE
SECOND FLOOR

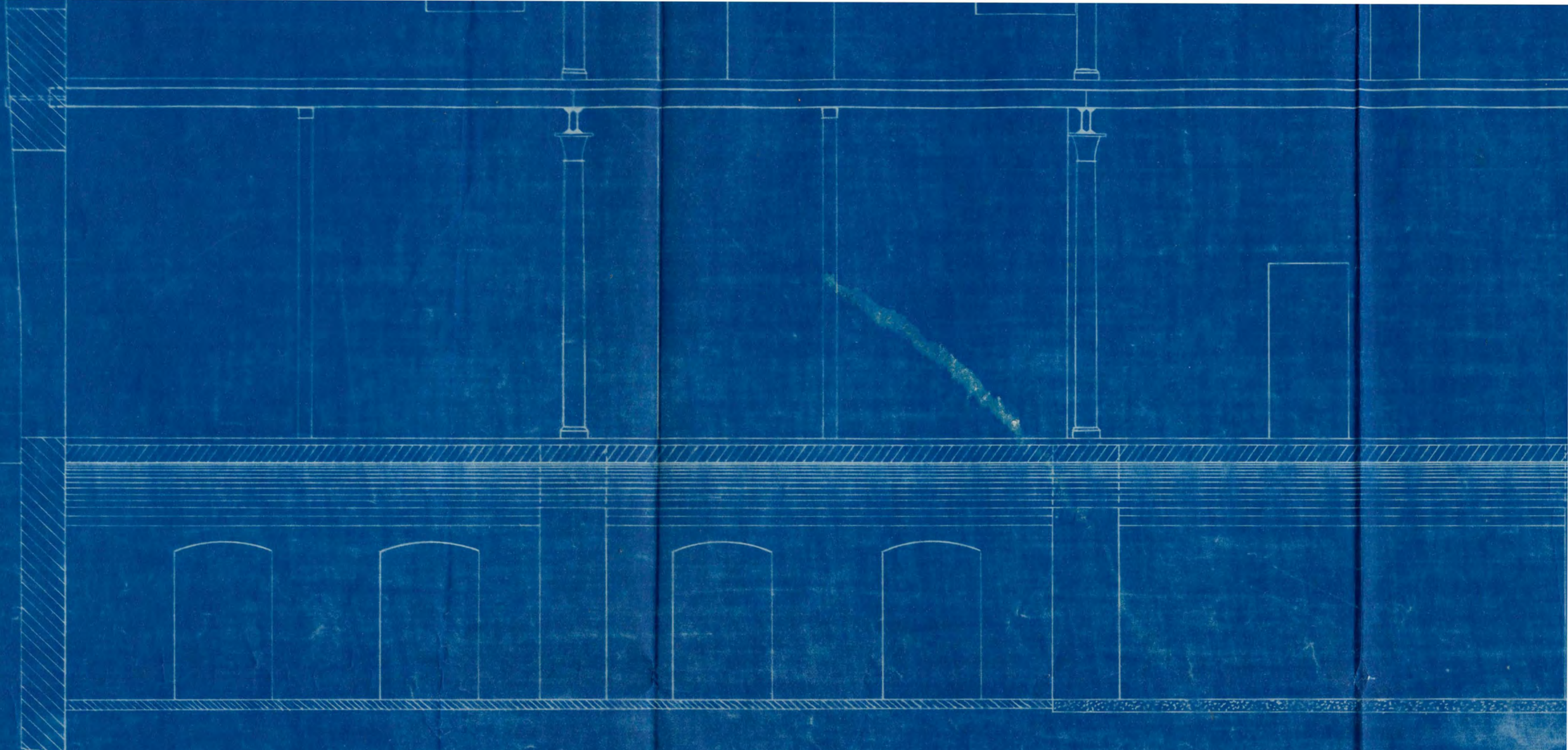


Section of walls is taken through springing lines of arches. The pier in red is the one that fell in the collapse, June, 1865. Compartments marked A have arches over them but are not excavated to level of cellar floor.

John A. Russell
June 1, 1865







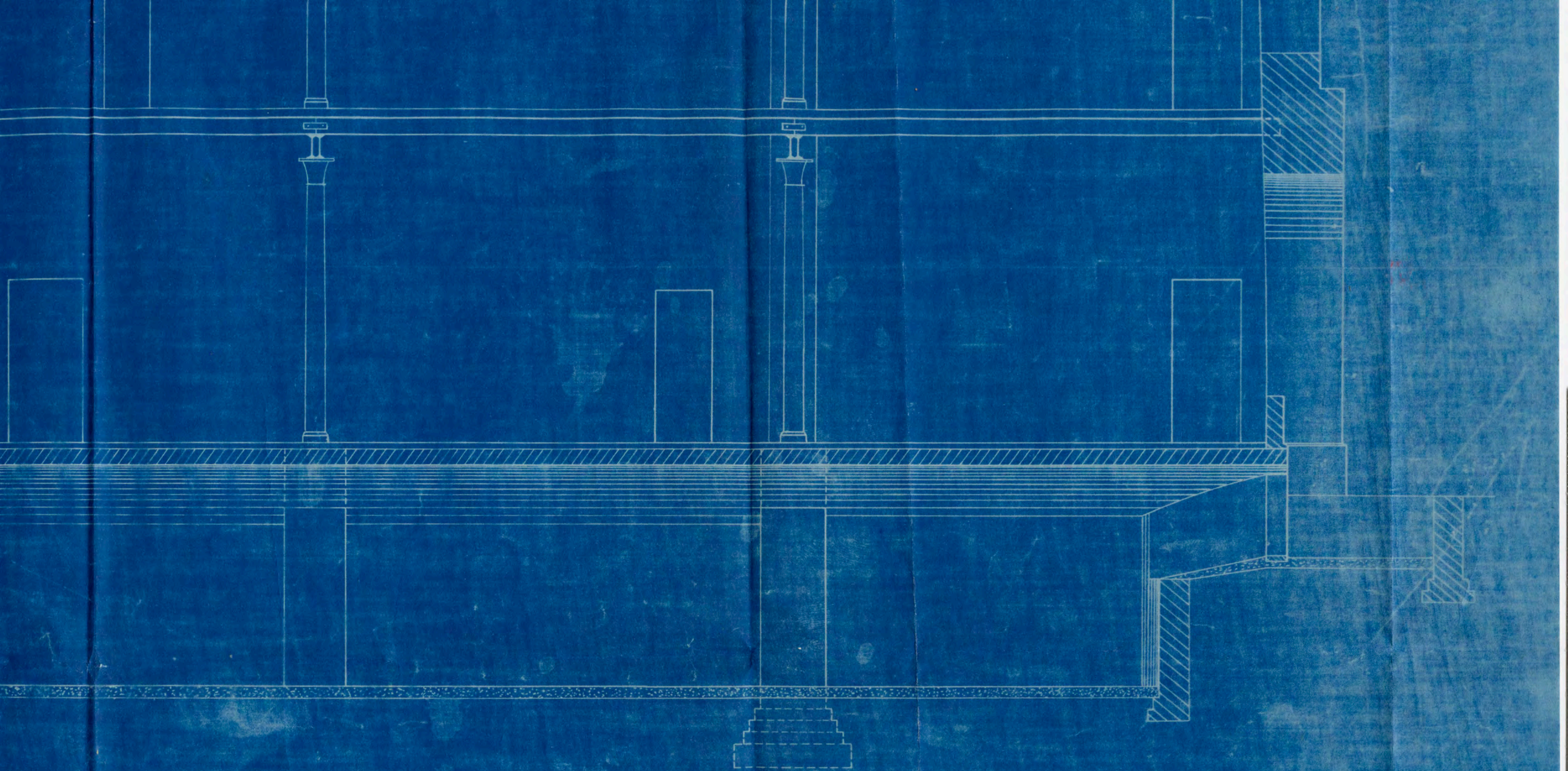
FORDS THEATRE

Section, from E to W.

1 5 10 15
Scale 1/4 in = 1 ft

Plaster Buildings & Crochets — 1893.
Vol. 1, Folder 23, File No. 341.15

Section through middle of building, showing at the worst point 12" double girders shown in sec floor beams, and openings in S. wall in elevation.



THEATRE

ion, from E to W.

Scale 1/4 in = 1 ft.

le of building, showing bulging walls
ble girders shown in section, columns, 9"
in S.W. in elevation.

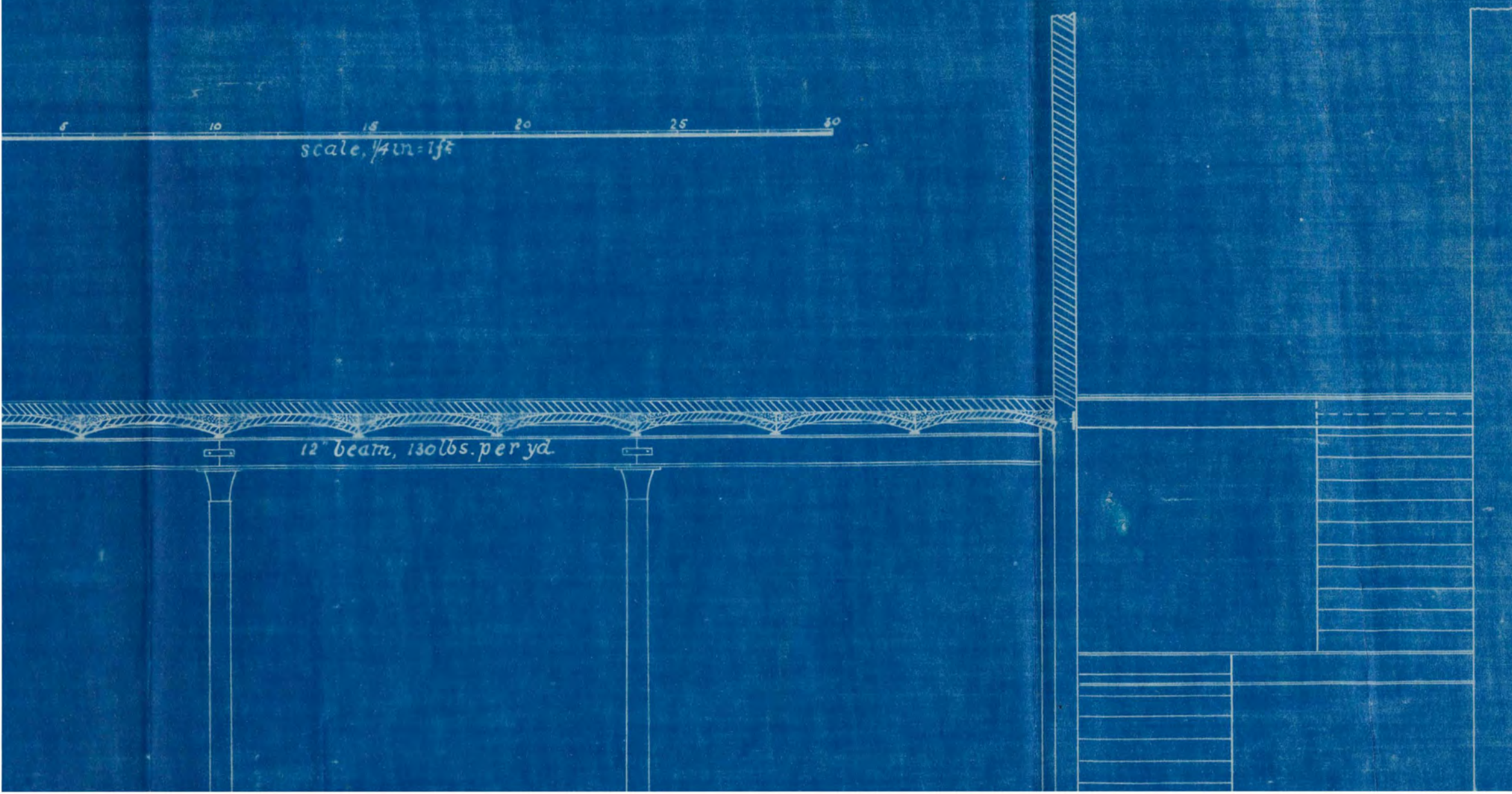
John S. Swall,
Arch't & Eng.

85.11-17

72.13-17

FORDS THEATRE

RS AND ALTERATIONS PROPOSED: SHADED PARTS SHOW
WORK TO BE DONE.



FORDS THEATRE

SECTION, SHOWING REPAIRS AND ALTERATIONS PROPOSED; SHADED PARTS

WORK TO BE DONE.

